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SUBJECT: SOMON AIR - "PRIVATE" IN NAME ONLY.

Reftel: Dushanbe 210

11. (SBU) Summary: On February 6 EmbOff experienced the pleasure of flying Tajikistan's "first private airline," Somon Air, aboard its wet-leased Turkish Pegasus Airlines Boeing 737-800. Minor intercultural hiccups aside, the flight was normal, and an improvement on the standards of state-owned Tajik Air. However, Somon Air so far functions only as an extension of state-owned Tajik Air; it has not begun to operate as an independent airline, and does not compete with Tajik Air. End Summary.

Whose Plane is This?

12. (SBU) EmbOff explicitly requested to travel on Tajik Air -- nicknamed "Tragic Air" - as the best of the meager options for the route through Moscow. EmbOff's earlier experiences with Russia based Domodedovo Airlines included late flights, surly staff, lost luggage, and getting hit in the head by falling suitcases.

13. (SBU) After purchasing the ticket and checking in for Tajik Air flight 631, EmbOff was surprised when the airport shuttle pulled up to Somon Air's Boeing 737-800. Curious, but well into pack mentality, EmbOff followed the rest of the passengers onto the plane. There was no explanation as to why a "private" airline was flying a route of the Tajik national airline. The Turkish cabin crew spoke neither Russian nor Tajik, and at first EmbOff wasn't even sure he was on the right flight.

14. (SBU) Flights from Dushanbe to Moscow are usually full, and this flight was no exception. Most of the Tajik passengers were labor migrants from the provincial regions of Tajikistan, and many seemed to be first time flyers. After watching a cabin attendant, in English, try in vain to explain to Tajiks sitting in an emergency exit row that they needed to place their carry-on baggage in the overhead compartments instead of in the aisle, EmbOff realized that all but one of the attendants could not speak Russian or Tajik. The emergency instructions and exit signs were all in Turkish, and the cabin crew all wore Pegasus Airlines uniforms. EmbOff helped explain to the Tajiks sitting in the emergency aisle that they needed to stow their bags for takeoff and landing. He then sat back and watched in amusement as the Turkish attendants futilely ran up and down the aisles trying to make the mostly Tajik passengers switch off their mobile telephones.

15. (SBU) The airplane itself seemed to be in decent shape, obviously used, a little worn around the edges, but on the whole a marked improvement on flying an old Tupolev 154. EmbOff opened the seat-back pocket in front of him. Surprised that he was able to open it with all of the old chewing gum and assorted other sticky substances in there, EmbOff flopped back into his seat,

understanding now why no in-flight magazines were provided. After a delay of about 30 minutes, the airplane took off for Moscow.

Moscow Welcomes Tajiks With Open Arms and Drug Dogs

¶6. (SBU) Apparently all Tajik flights are subject to extensive security scrutiny upon arrival in Moscow. Somon Air passengers waited for over an hour in the baggage claim area in Domodedovo Airport (after a near on-time arrival) before a baggage carousel was even announced. An airport employee told EmbOff that "the dogs" needed time to go over every bag. During this extended wait, EmbOff also noted that immigration officials corralled arriving passengers. Qalso noted that immigration officials corralled arriving passengers who appeared Central Asian after they had passed passport control and before they entered the baggage claim area. These officials examined the Tajiks' passports and sent selected passengers to the immigration counter.

¶7. (SBU) Somon Air also flew the route of Tajik Air flight 632 back to Dushanbe on February 18, leaving about an hour behind schedule without any explanation to the waiting passengers. Upon boarding, EmbOff found that the flight was empty, and happily stretched out in his own row. The flight to Dushanbe was uneventful and again arrived nearly on time. Reminiscent of the language problems on the flight to Moscow, the cabin crew seemed not to be fully briefed for their mission. When the Turkish crew came through with "dinner" and EmbOff asked what was being served, in English, the flight attendant rolled her eyes, shrugged, and said, "I don't know." It turned out to be the usual airline food, some sort of stewed meat with rice and green peas, which tasted just like any other reheated airline dinner. When EmbOff asked for a blanket for his wife who was traveling with him, the lone Tajik attendant curtly told him that blankets were for business class passengers only - at which point it

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was EmbOff's turn to roll his eyes.

Comment - Tourist Hopes Dashed

¶8. (SBU) The disorientation Somon Air's Turkish crew are suffering is not the only start-up difficulty of this airline. Moscow is so far the only route it flies, and it does this as a Tajik Air flight.

In reftel we theorized that Somon might replace Tajik Air's monopoly with its own, given its presidential connections (Somon is controlled by the President's brother-in-law). So far, it's not clear to us what is actually happening, but it's certainly not commercial competition. The other flights Somon Air claims on its website - to Almaty, Urumqi, Dubai, and Istanbul - don't yet exist. Besides flying for Tajik Air its other role is, so far, to be a presidential travel convenience. President Rahmon has used Somon's only aircraft for his official travel at least once already, and since the airplane is newer and better than anything else around here, he'll likely continue this practice. We don't know when Somon Air will emerge as an independently functioning airline, nor how it benefits, if at all, from its current role as a contractor to Tajik Air; but it seems so far to be "private" in name, not in function.

End Comment.

JACOBSON